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SUBJECT: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FIGHTS: OPPOSITION DEMOCRATIC
PARTY TOPS PRESIDENT LEE

REF: SEOUL 50

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The surprise winner of the latest round of fighting in the National Assembly was the opposition Democratic Party, which saw its approval rating double in two months. The main loser is President Lee Myung-bak, closely followed by the GNP leadership. Both were shown to be weak, not capable of delivering, let alone defining their legislative vision. Although physical confrontation in the National Assembly is nothing new, the Korean public especially came away believing that it should no longer be part of Korea's democratic tradition. There will be increasing calls for procedural reform to allow more professional means of voicing dissent. However, there is no likelihood that the parties can agree on any meaningful proposal. END SUMMARY.

DP Wins the Battle

¶2. (C) The surprise winner of this most recent pitched battle in the National Assembly is the opposition DP, because after a 12-day occupation of the main floor of the National Assembly (reftel), with lawmakers attached to the Speaker's chair with carabineers and other hiking implements, the DP has seen its support rise to match the ruling Grand National Party's (GNP) at around 30 percent in recent polls. At first, as DP lawmakers made international news by taking a sledgehammer to the Foreign Affairs, Trade and Unification (FATU) committee room door to try to stop the KORUS FTA, it looked like they had overplayed their hand. Some even speculated the party could soon enter an era of single-digit support after over a year of already abysmal support that hovered in the teens. However, the DP, with no alternative proposal or even a fall-back plan, decided to keep fighting, and it seems to have worked.

¶3. (C) Most experts note that this bump in public support will likely be short-lived and is mostly explained as a return of hard-core liberals to the beleaguered party. Their assumptions are based on their estimate that about 25-30 percent of Koreans are liberal, traditional DP supporters, who had turned their backs on the party after its disappointing track record under former president Roh Moo-hyun. But the DP, with its long history of fighting the government on behalf of common people, seems to have struck a

chord with its determination to stop the President's and GNP's efforts to steamroll opposition to pending bills. The downside is that as the DP has offered no alternative and is vulnerable to charges of obstruction.

President Lee Loses

¶4. (C) President Lee comes out of this scrum looking weak and helpless. After a year of frustrations and false starts hampered by the beef controversy, the financial crisis and personnel problems, President Lee had desperately wanted a victory in this battle to show friends and foes alike that he was in charge. On top of Lee's political agenda was the passage of a number of "MB-nomics bills" to get his administration moving. He also wanted a showdown on the KORUS FTA, media reform, and a number of social legislation to establish his own "conservative" agenda promised during his presidential campaign. Although our Blue House contacts tell us President Lee has reacted to the latest round of disappointment by drawing up a new plan to try to push through reforms in the coming months, for now at least, the passage of key bills is in doubt. Also in doubt is Lee's popular standing, which had climbed from a summer low in high teens to almost 30 percent recently, but latest polls show his approval slipping back down to the low 20s.

GNP Weakened

¶5. (C) For the GNP the failure to push through the government's proposed legislation looks like a failure, which will probably necessitate, at least, Floor Leader Hong Joon-pyo's resignation. The Blue House is reportedly unhappy with Speaker Kim Hyung-o's inability to carry through on promises to bring the legislation before a plenary vote. Blue House sources tell us that the Speaker and the GNP leadership knew exactly what had to be done to bring the bills to a plenary vote, but were unable to do so. Much will depend on how much progress is made on these bills in the next few days, but, without a firm deadline, it is very likely that the opposition will find ways to drag discussion out for weeks to come. To further stymie the government's legislative plans, the compromise reached between the parties calls for a postponement of discussion of the KORUS FTA and more controversial "social reform" laws until the end of the month.

¶6. (C) The fight with the opposition parties has also exacerbated the internal rift between supporters of President Lee Myung-bak and of former party chair Park Geun-hye. On January 5, Park belatedly weighed in on the National Assembly conflict, placing a significant share of the blame on the GNP leadership's determination to push "poorly conceived bills" forward and providing a not-so-veiled criticism of the President. The pro-Lee and pro-Park factions, who are already posturing for control of the nomination process ahead of the 2010 April local elections, disagree over how to proceed with the President's legislative agenda. Among the public, pro-Park legislators currently have the upper hand, with a recent KSOI poll indicating that 42 percent of respondents favored the pro-Park group within the GNP while only 16 percent favored the pro-Lee group.

Consensus-Based Tradition

¶7. (C) The GNP's control of 172 seats in the 299-seat National Assembly -- intra-party rivalry notwithstanding -- in theory allows the party to push through legislation without the consent of the opposition. However, the strong tradition of building consensus before voting on legislation typically prevents the ruling party from acting unilaterally. There have been many similar battles in the National Assembly, most recently over the National Security Law and

education reform (2005), impeachment of Roh Moo-hyun (2004), and labor reform (1996).

18. (C) Leading pundits and political observers note that one basic reason why fights erupt despite the majority-rule system is twofold. First, there is a history of struggle -- both within and outside the legislature -- against real or perceived authoritarianism to protect people's rights. Second, Koreans do not yet have faith in their legal system; while laws may be harmless as written, some Koreans fear the powerful central government -- especially the prosecutor's office and police -- could exploit laws to oppress the people. Therefore, some laws currently under discussion -- such as the prevention of cyber-bullying bill -- have outraged activists who claim that removing the anonymity of internet users would allow the government to control speech and expression.

Catalyst for Change?

19. (C) Still experts and, much more important, the public agree that the latest display of force among their legislators was among the worst in recent memory. Our Korean interlocutors were especially upset over the international news coverage, commenting that the New York Times' front page picture of the National Assembly clashes and lengthy segments in CNN had induced national shame. They are very much open to changes so that such pictures can be avoided, but, of course, there is no consensus on what should be done and little expectation that major changes will be forthcoming. There is talk of changes even in the National Assembly, which has convened a multi-party committee to discuss procedural reforms. However, the proposals have been aimed at

bolstering each party's position rather than at addressing needed systemic changes. The DP, for its part, has suggested strengthening the limitations on allowing the Speaker to present bills to the plenary, while the GNP wants to require legal permission before lawmakers can forcibly occupy the main chamber or committee rooms in the National Assembly. There is no likelihood the parties can agree on any changes to key procedures.
STEPHENS